



ABOVE An aerial photograph of Caistor St Edmund, looking south, with the internal Roman street plan visible as parch marks. Surviving stretches of the Roman city wall are visible running along the bottom of the picture.

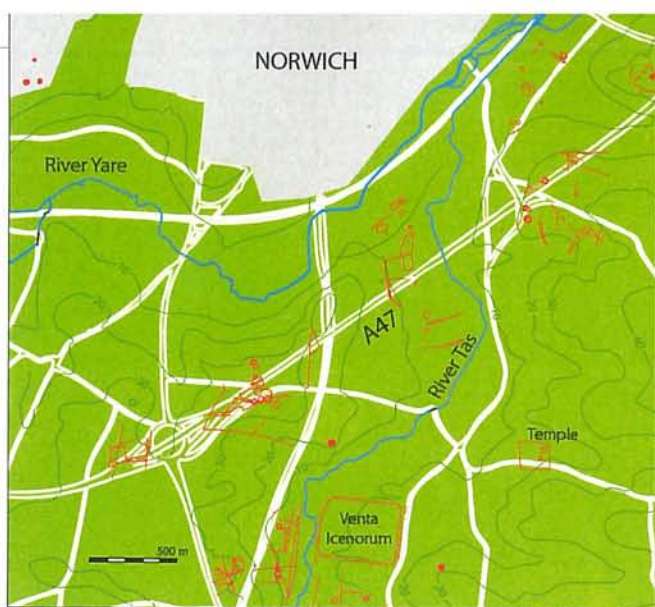
The Iceni under Rome

Excavating Caistor St Edmund

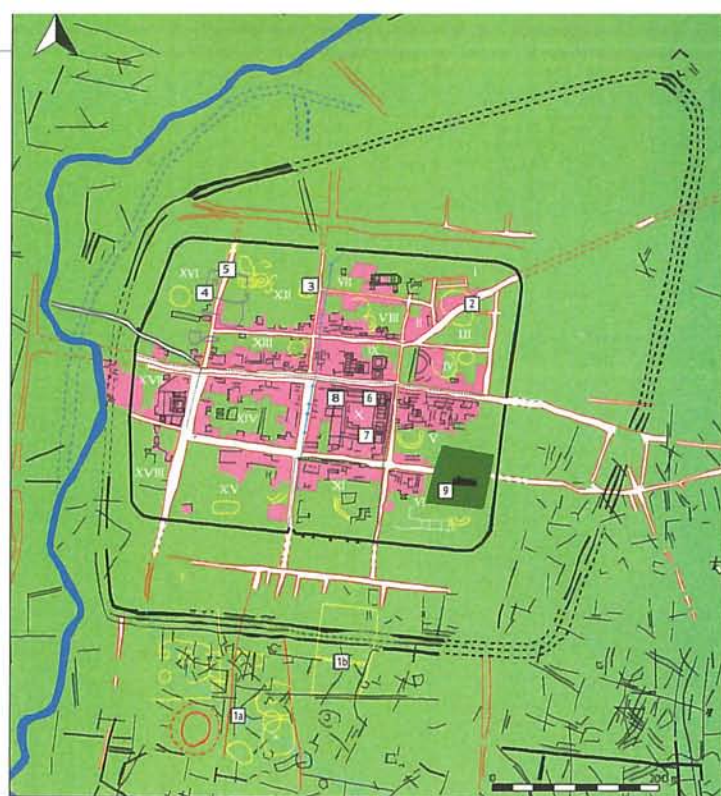
The town at Caistor St Edmund is traditionally seen as a product of Roman reprisals after the Boudican revolt. Founded on the site of a major Iceni centre, the new settlement was a powerful symbol of Rome's dominance. Or so it seemed. New research is questioning our view of the town, as **William Bowden** reveals.

ALL IMAGES: William Bowden, unless otherwise stated

Boudica, the legendary queen of the Iceni, casts a long shadow in East Anglia. One of the few individuals from Roman Britain we know more about than simply a name, Boudica's image as a wronged woman fighting foreign oppression makes her a natural heroine. This image has heavily influenced perceptions of the Roman town of *Venta Icenorum*. Now lying beneath green fields at Caistor St Edmund, to the south of Norwich, the



ABOVE *Venta Icenorum* in relation to Norwich and known archaeological features (in red). The current plan of the Roman town (RIGHT) is based on all available data, including cropmark data recently digitised under the English Heritage-sponsored National Mapping Programme. The large, kite-shaped enclosure is likely to represent a defensive circuit that pre-dates the Late Roman walls.



IMAGES: William Bowden, after Trevor Ashwin

settlement was founded deep in Iceni territory, and was long known locally as 'Caistor Camp'. It probably owed this name to the mistaken 19th-century idea that it was a Roman military installation intended to bring the truculent tribe to heel. But the town is still viewed as a 'Roman' entity, established to oversee the rebellious Iceni: its regimented grid plan standing in stark opposition to ideas of the warrior queen and her freedom-loving people.

The town's full name of *Venta Icenorum* – literally 'market of the Iceni' – is preserved in a 3rd-century document known as the Antonine Itinerary. The 2nd-century author Ptolemy also mentions *Venta*, observing it was the one notable town of the Iceni. William Camden, the great 16th-century antiquarian, first recognised Caistor St Edmund as *Venta Icenorum*, although later Norwich-based antiquarians constructed an elaborate argument to claim that Norwich itself was the Roman town. Chance discoveries at the site over the years were noted by local antiquarians, but unlike Silchester and Wroxeter the town escaped the attentions of Victorian excavators.

Caistor uncovered

Modern study of Caistor can be said to have started on Friday 20 July 1928, when a remarkable series of aerial photographs were taken. These revealed the town street-plan and various buildings in extraordinary detail. First published in *The Times* in March 1929, they subsequently appeared that year in *Antiquity*. In a forward-thinking commentary that accompanied the *Antiquity* publication,

Mortimer Wheeler argued strongly against any excavation on the site without clearly defined research aims, observing that simply unearthing more building plans would tell us little we did not already know about Roman Britain.

Wheeler's advice was not heeded. An excavation committee was established by the Norfolk and Norwich Archaeological Society, and a call went out for public subscriptions to fund the digging. The appeal raised £820 (equivalent to around £28,000 today) and the excavation committee appointed Donald Atkinson of Manchester University to direct the work. Atkinson had previously excavated at Wroxeter, and made a name for himself in Norfolk with his excavations on the Roman villa at Gayton Thorpe near King's Lynn.

Atkinson excavated at Caistor between 1929 and 1935, targeting those structures that showed up most clearly on the aerial photographs. These included the buildings forming the public heart of the Roman town: the forum and basilica, two small temples and a bath complex, as well as two 'houses' and the south gate of the fortifications. He dug with a small team of workmen who were paid bonuses for finding objects of interest, such as coins or Samian pottery. Rumour has it that this incentive backfired. Objects found on the spoilheap were allegedly claimed

Mortimer Wheeler argued strongly against any excavation on the site without clearly defined research aims. He was not heeded.

PHOTOS: courtesy Norfolk Museums Service



ABOVE The 1928 aerial photograph of *Venta Icenorum* as published in the *Eastern Daily Press*. This acted as a stimulus for excavation at the site. Directed by Donald Atkinson, work included his 1931 exploration of the forum, shown here (RIGHT) looking east along the north portico stylobate wall. Among the finds from his campaign was this bronze vessel handle depicting Mercury (INSET), currently on display in the Norwich Castle Museum's Boudica Gallery.



Roman Britain. Equally resilient is the notion that the town's development was stunted by the Iceni's impoverishment after the uprising and subsequent Roman reprisals.

This was the situation in 2005 when I approached the Norfolk Archaeological Trust – the site-owners – with the intention of establishing a long-term research project at Caistor. At the outset I had a series of basic questions about the site. Why did the Roman town lie away from the spot occupied by Medieval and modern Norwich, whose river connections made it a much more suitable settlement site? What was the Roman

to have come from the trenches in order to secure a bonus – compromising the veracity of Atkinson's findings.

Atkinson's interpretation of the site, which publications and newspaper reports suggest was firmly established by 1931, was straightforward. For him 'the town was laid out and occupation began in the reign of Vespasian (AD 69-79), presumably when the effects of the revolt of Boudicca had passed away and the Iceni had been pacified.' Like many of his contemporaries, Atkinson's view of the Roman Empire was coloured by the British Empire. In this model Rome was a civilising power that was superior to the indigenous Britons. The native population was judged on the extent to which they adopted a Roman way of life, and found wanting where they failed to do so. For Atkinson the development of the town was retarded by the backwardness of the Iceni, who achieved what he dismissed as 'an imperfect degree of Romanization'.

The idea that Caistor was founded off the back of the Boudican revolt has remained unquestioned in almost all subsequent literature on





town actually like and how did it develop? Finally – and perhaps most intriguingly – what happened after the Roman period to diminish an apparently thriving settlement to the point where its only modern occupants are sheep?

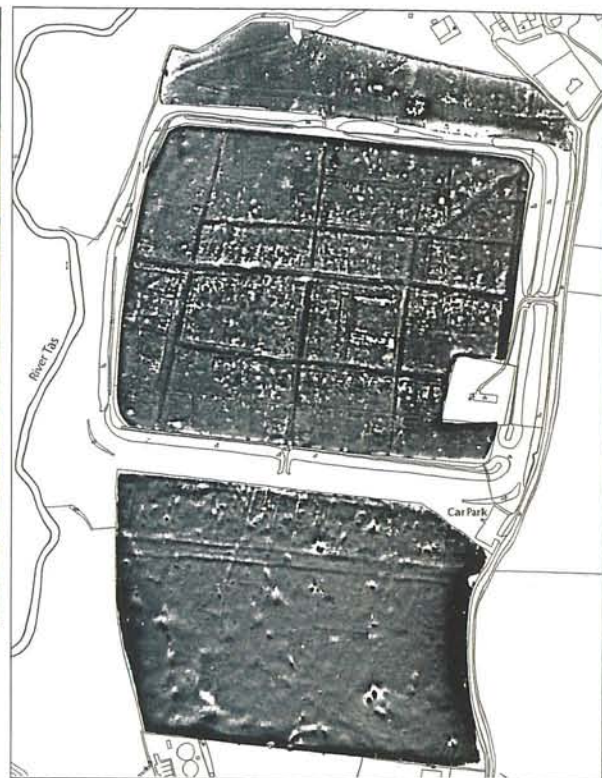
Town planning

Over the last six years we have used a range of archaeological approaches to investigate the site. At the outset, I was clear that I wanted a project that would capitalise on the skills and knowledge of Norfolk's professional archaeological community, and also involve the wider local community. Although Caistor is, without a doubt, one of the most important archaeological sites in the region, there was relatively little awareness of it beyond its immediate area. We thus instigated a major volunteer programme, as well as ensuring that visitors to the site understand what we are doing and why.

We commenced with a geophysical survey of the walled town, carried out by David Bescoby of the University of East Anglia. The survey, using a GPS-enabled cart-mounted magnetometer, was rapid and produced an extraordinarily detailed plan of the walled town, revealing its streets and buildings with startling clarity. The survey even detected a line of strong iron signals next to the axial north-south street. These appear to be metal collars that once formed junctions between lengths of wooden water pipe. David Bescoby has continued to expand the survey, taking in the fields to the south, north, and west of the town, and covering some 52 hectares in total.

ABOVE David Bescoby using a cart-mounted Caesium Vapour magnetometer. Location data is provided through an onboard GPS system. Such survey is producing an ever more detailed understanding of the town and its hinterland. To date 52 hectares have been investigated, with the geophysical plot showing progress as of 2009.

BELOW This Icenian gold quarter stater (c.20 BC-AD 10) was a rare Iron Age find from the excavations.



The geophysical survey also seemed to yield some intriguing clues about the town's origins. It has long been suspected that the Roman town was established on a previously significant Icenian centre. The name *Venta Icenorum* certainly supports this, and conspicuous quantities of Iron Age material have been found in the vicinity of the site, including brooches, horse fittings, and coins. Our survey identified what appeared to be roundhouse gullies and ring ditches, some apparently truncated by Roman streets and buildings. A field to the south of the walled town included a number of large circular features adjacent to the amphitheatre. Could these features, together with the known Iron Age material, indicate a substantial prehistoric settlement preceding the Roman town? It seemed a reasonable proposition, which we duly tested through excavation.

Our excavations of the putative prehistoric features were a textbook example of how you can ruin a perfectly good hypothesis by testing it! A large circular feature in the field to the south of the walled town proved to be of natural (probably glacial) origin, although the excavation did reveal a single Iron Age gully, as well as other features of Bronze Age and Roman date, together with an impressive assemblage of Mesolithic flint. Meanwhile investigation of a circular feature within

CAISTOR ST EDMUND Roman town



LEFT An overview of one of the excavations in the south field. A large circular feature visible on the geophysics proved to be of natural origin, but the excavations produced features of Bronze Age to Roman date. The group of people in the centre are working on an *in situ* scatter of Mesolithic flint-working debris.

the walled town demonstrated that it was a wooden structure that could not be earlier than the 3rd century AD. With the exception of the gully, none of our trenches (11 in total) have revealed any stratified Iron Age deposits or significant quantities of residual material. Currently there is no indication of Iron Age settlement on any scale beneath the walled town, although the evidence of the metalwork and coins found by chance still suggests occupation somewhere in its vicinity.

IMAGE: William Bowden, after Sue White



LEFT *Venta Icenorum* in relation to the so-called 'Great Estuary'.

Creation myth

So why was the Roman town founded there? Its position on the River Tas is clearly of some significance. The Tas feeds into the River Yare, which ultimately connects to the North Sea. In antiquity the estuary of the Yare was seemingly much larger than today, although how long this so-called 'Great Estuary' remained open before it was effectively closed by the Yarmouth sandbar is debatable. It has long been argued that the River Tas was wider and deeper in the Roman period, making Caistor accessible to large, possibly sea-going vessels. There is a very strong

BELOW This curse tablet requesting Neptune to intervene in a case of theft was discovered on the bank of the River Tas in 1981 and is currently on display in the Boudica Gallery at Norwich Castle Museum.



PHOTO: courtesy Norfolk Museums Service

local tradition that Roman ships travelled up the Tas to Caistor. John Kirkpatrick, who died in 1728, wrote that Caistor had 'ringbolts in the walls, whereto ships were fastened'. A number of local people have also mentioned these 'ringbolts', claiming that their grandfathers saw them.

Is it possible that Caistor was once accessible to large vessels? David Bescoby has been investigating this question, taking lines of core samples across the river flood-plain adjacent to the site and using Electrical Resistivity Tomography (ERT) to investigate and map deposits relating to the river in earlier periods. So far this work has clearly demonstrated that while the river has moved since antiquity, it was never significantly deeper or wider than today – around 7m across and 0.5m deep – suggesting that it could only have been reached by relatively small, flat-bottomed boats. Perhaps, rather than reflecting the navigability of the river, it was a fording point that determined the location of the town.

In common with other watery locations in pre-Roman Britain, the river may also have had a religious significance. This was certainly the case in the Roman period. One of the most illuminating finds from the site is a lead curse tablet, found in 1981 on the bank of the Tas, which asks for Neptune's help in recovering a series of items that had been stolen from the dedicator. These items included a wreath, bracelets, a cap, a mirror, a head-dress, a pair of leggings, and ten pewter vessels. In return for his help Neptune was offered the leggings. Sadly, the deity's response to this generous offer was not recorded.

The reasons behind the town's location thus remain opaque, but we are now rather better



ABOVE Found in a pit, this worn *mortarium* had a hole punched through its bottom. Was this intended to put it beyond use before it was deposited?

informed about the chronology of Caistor's foundation. As noted earlier, Donald Atkinson was firmly convinced that the town was founded in the aftermath of the Boudican revolt, with the street-grid laid out in the 70s AD. Although Atkinson's dating has been repeated many times, the evidence from his own excavations indicates that the excavated streets are unlikely to be much earlier than AD 100-120. The key evidence was a sherd of Samian pottery, unlikely to date much earlier than AD 90, that came from the lowest layer of street-surfacing adjacent to the South Gate.

Caistor's streets are made of layers of fine rammed gravel, with each layer seemingly representing a resurfacing. Some of the central streets have up to eight layers of gravel, suggesting multiple repairs. One curious feature of the north-east corner of the town is a street that runs at a 45° angle to the rest of the street grid. Sectioning this showed that in its earliest phase the street was around 7m wide and had a pronounced camber. Later resurfacing gradually flattened this out, resulting in a much wider thoroughfare. Although no dating evidence was recovered from beneath the street, the earliest occupation adjacent to it was no earlier than AD 120.

A section through another street in the north-west area of the walled town produced a completely different result. Here the gravel was only 0.2m (two layers) deep, much thinner than the 1m of gravel – or eight layers – that built up on the diagonal street, clearly indicating that the former had not been resurfaced so frequently. More importantly, pottery from beneath the road showed that it could not be earlier than the late 2nd century. The street grid, therefore, was not all laid out at the same time.

So far as we can tell, the formal establishment of a gridded town envisaged by Donald Atkinson

BELOW A section through the diagonal street in the north-east of the site (**LEFT**). The layers of gravel surface visible in the section show eight phases of resurfacing. Another street in the north-west part of the town (**RIGHT**), however, had a far shallower depth of gravel and had been laid out at a much later date.





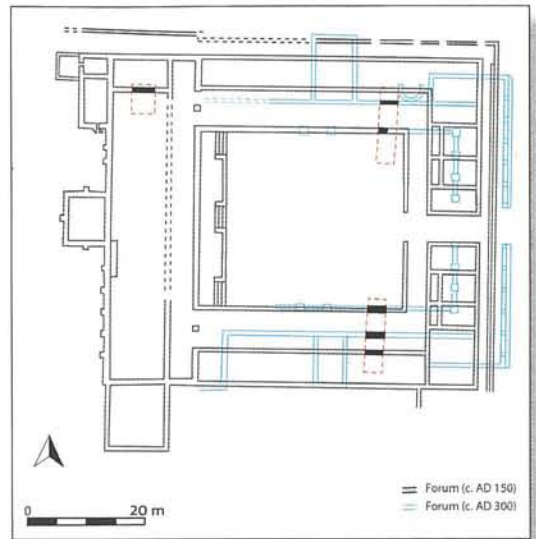
as part of the pacification of the Iceni following the Boudican revolt is an illusion. At least one of the streets does not belong to the original plan, and there seems to be little evidence that the earliest streets were constructed much before the start of the 2nd century. Atkinson's excavations do, however, give some evidence of activity in the aftermath of the Boudican revolt. Samian pottery and coins dating to the second half of the 1st century AD demonstrate some form of occupation, while equipment finds hint at a military presence. Atkinson also found traces of structures that may date to before AD 90. Yet whatever the original nature of these, at present there is no evidence of a formal town in the 70s AD.

Garden city

What was *Venta Icenorum* actually like? The geophysics suggest that, like many towns in Roman Britain, the street grid was not densely packed with buildings. Instead there appears to have been ample open space in the town, perhaps exploited for grazing or small-scale cultivation. Our excavations in the graveyard of St Edmund's church (in advance of a new kitchen and toilet) demonstrated that this part of the town saw no activity before the late 3rd century.

All the known buildings that date to before the mid 2nd century – including those excavated by both ourselves and Atkinson – were made of timber and clay. Despite their fabric, they were decorated with painted plaster and clearly buildings of some aspiration. Those found by Atkinson in the area to the north of the forum were apparently destroyed by fire around AD 140. We found traces of similar buildings beneath the forum. These had also been destroyed by fire around the mid 2nd century, suggesting that the core

ABOVE Burnt deposits beneath the south wing of the forum. The excavator (George) is crouching in the bottom of one of Donald Atkinson's wall-chasing trenches, the edge of which is visible in the section. The large flint foundation is associated with one of the walls of the early 4th-century forum (and was cut from a much higher level). Excavations in 2011 allowed a revised plan (**ABOVE RIGHT**) of the forum to be devised.



of the modest early settlement was devastated by a catastrophic conflagration. It is tempting to envisage a timber forum that pre-dated the known masonry structure.

Masonry buildings first appear at Caistor, as at other towns in Roman Britain, during the second half of the 2nd century. Among the upgraded buildings were the new forum (constructed perhaps around AD 150-160) and two temples immediately to the north of the forum (both excavated by Atkinson). This period of civic activity did not last long, however, and by the early 3rd century the forum was seemingly abandoned, its porticos and central courtyard choked with a thick layer of dirt and refuse. Although a number of fora in Roman Britain were abandoned during the 3rd century, what is highly unusual about Caistor is that its forum was rebuilt in the early 4th century. The new forum – if such it was – was built on almost entirely new foundations, although the basilica appears to have been retained and reused.

Late Roman resurgence

It was not only the forum that showed revived activity in the 4th century. This was the period when the town saw its most intensive use. All the trenches excavated within the walled area produced significant quantities of Late Roman material, with some areas apparently occupied for the first time. Following the construction of the town walls (perhaps in the late 3rd century) and the building of the new forum, *Venta Icenorum* was seemingly the focus of renewed political power within the region. Its revival as a place of administrative importance – and perhaps the presence of a reassuringly robust defensive wall – may have made it attractive to the people of the area, perhaps explaining the occupation boom in this period.

Why did *Venta Icenorum* suddenly become a place of political significance? The only other town in Britain known to have its forum rebuilt in the 4th century was Cirencester. This may be linked to its elevation to the capital of *Britannia Prima*, one of the four provinces into which Britain was divided at the start of the 4th century. The capitals of the other three provinces are unknown, although they are usually assumed to be York, Lincoln, and London. It is not impossible that Caistor became one of these provincial capitals, although the chances of proving it seem slim. The strategic importance of the region is highlighted by the presence of Late Roman shore-forts at Burgh Castle, Caister-on-Sea, and Brancaster, testifying to an increased need to secure the coastline. The Late Roman resurgence of *Venta Icenorum*, whether or not it was a provincial capital, can also be seen in light of the region's increased military importance as it became one of the first lines of defence against threats from the North Sea.

Notwithstanding this Late Roman revival, the walled town of *Venta Icenorum* does not seem to have survived long into the 5th century. None of the trenches we excavated within the walled town produced evidence of activity beyond this date, although, intriguingly, Middle Saxon pottery was discovered in excavations around St Edmund's church. There are, however, Early Saxon cemeteries to the south-east and north-west of the town, while the fields to the west of the River Tas have produced a tantalising assemblage of Middle Saxon coins and metalwork. It is this area, recently acquired by the Norfolk

SOURCE

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Archaeological Trust, which may hold the key to understanding post-Roman Caistor. Perhaps in the Early and Middle Saxon periods it was one of a number of small settlements spread along the river valleys of this part of Norfolk. Eventually the settlements around the confluence of the Yare and Wensum rivers grew and coalesced into Norwich, ultimately one of the largest cities of Medieval Britain, finally eclipsing Caistor as a place of political power:

Caistor and the Iceni have too often been viewed through the lens of the Boudican revolt. A single episode has defined the Iron Age and Roman periods of much of eastern Britain for modern eyes. The Caistor excavations demonstrate that the Iceni followed their own distinctive path under Rome, with the town developing in a trajectory that reflected the aspirations of its inhabitants as much as the interests of Rome. We should not judge Caistor in terms of success or failure, weighed against some imagined Roman ideal. Instead we should look at how a native population, interacting with Rome, used and adapted the idea of a Classical town. As its name suggests, *Venta Icenorum* was as much a town of the Iceni as the Romans. (1)

BELOW A computer reconstruction of the town as it may have appeared in the 4th century.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The site is open to the public: see www.norfarthrust.org.uk.

IMAGE: Channel 4/Rough Collie

